

Remarks at a Memorial Service for Former Secretary of Defense Ashton B. Carter
January 12, 2023

This is beyond my capacity to accurately assess what an incredible man Ash was. Ash was a force. He was a force of nature. His genius was evident, his integrity unfailing, and his commitment to service before self was literally inspiring.

I know we can all still picture Ash as he was until the very end.

Professor Carter: packing students into his classroom in Cambridge, guiding them forward toward a life of service.

Secretary Carter: advising both me and Secretary Austin on technology and innovation. Austin got it quicker than Biden, but—Doctor Carter: harnessing his incredible intellect to sharpen our cutting edge as a Nation and to make sure—make sure America always leads the world with both our power but also our purpose.

I wish so deeply that Ash had lived to enjoy the new honorific—one he was looking forward to—of being grandfather. But he's smiling right now, and he's looking down. And he'll be there.

Will, Ava—you were his heart. He filled every office—at least I was ever in—with your photos. I kept asking, "Who's that big guy?" [*Laughter*] He loved seeing you—he loved seeing you blaze your own trails in the world, together with your wonderful spouses, Mariah and Surya.

And I think the reason he talked to me about it is—you know me, I never talk about my children. [*Laughter*]

But, Clayton, you and Ash parented two exceptional kids together. Corinne and Cynthia, you were with Ash from the very beginning. As I told you downstairs, I was lucky, as well. I had sisters better looking and smarter than me. And so did he. And he relied on you. Watching your little brother—your little brother chart his phenomenal path from theoretical physics to the world of science, but the world—to a world leader.

And, Stephanie, everyone could see: He cherished you. He cherished you. You made him whole.

I have some idea—and every case is not the same—but how hard this is, how unreal and unfair it seems, to lose someone you love so suddenly, someone who should have had so many years ahead of them. The suddenness, in my view, magnifies the grief. It makes it just inescapable.

And on behalf of our Nation, I just want to say thank you. Thank you for sharing Ash with us and for your own service to our country. We're truly grateful.

Secretary Austin, Secretary Blinken, Secretary McDonough, Secretary Mayorkas, Director Haines, General Milley, General Dunford, Members of Congress, and all the distinguished leaders from across the Government, our military, and private sector and academia: Ralph Waldo Emerson once said, "An institution is the lengthened shadow of one man." An institution is the lengthened shadow of one man.

He might have been talking about Ash, but nowhere more than the Department of Defense. Over the course of four decades, working in and out of the Pentagon, walking miles and miles of laps, Ash made an impact felt far into the future.

Ash always took the hardest jobs, the seemingly impossible missions, because he believed he could make a difference. And he did make a difference.

I stand here today as Commander in Chief of, as Ash always said, the "finest fighting force the world has ever known." And that is not hyperbole. The finest fighting force the world has ever known. A force made stronger and more inclusive by Ash's principles and convictions. A force made up of warriors who are safer because of Ash's determination to protect them and give them what they needed. A force and a department forever shaped by Ash's far-reaching vision and his relentless—relentless—innovation.

He believed, as I do, in what America can achieve when we put our minds to it. He believed not just in getting things done, but getting things done in record time, which I'm sure those who worked for him found very interesting sometimes. I've got a lot of you—[laughter]—laughter on this side.

As many of you know well, he took personal pleasure in busting through bureaucratic redtape to deliver results. And woe unto the staffer who failed to follow through on an assignment that Ash had given them. Dean, as they say in my church, "Bless me Father, for they have sinned."

But I'm serious—I see some people nodding in recognition—he was an incredible guy.

Ash was a scientist, first and always. A truth seeker, a teacher. That training shaped his leadership. And he sought to understand a problem from every angle. He took the time then to explain his thinking. And he never let politics or expediency color his recommendation. He always followed where the facts led him. And sometimes there were places we didn't want to go.

That's what made his counsel so valuable to President Obama and to me, as Vice President, and so many other leaders. Ash felt a duty to deliver his best possible analysis and recommendation with exceptional candor, with exceptional discretion, and above all, with exceptional integrity.

As I told Stephanie when I called her the morning after Ash passed, that's actually the first thing I think of when I think of Ash. I think of a word—no, seriously: integrity. His integrity. It was indomitable. And I never, ever had to wonder—I've been doing this job a long—not as President, but in high public office. Never had to wonder whether there was an edge to it, whether there was a secondary motive I didn't see. How he matched his scientific principles with a straightforward moral conviction that truth, honesty, and decency matter.

And how Ash never lost sight of what his work at the Pentagon meant for the safety of the American people—whether he was serving with a—his mentor and great friend, Secretary of Defense Bill Perry, in the nineties to reduce the risks of nuclear proliferation after the Soviet Union collapsed, or when Ash became Secretary himself in 2015, taking the fight to ISIS to smash their hold on territories in Iraq and Syria and keep America safe from terrorist threats.

Above all, Ash had an unmistakable commitment to his troops, who put their lives on the line for our country every single day. Ash understood to his core that we had a sacred—we have a sacred obligation to give them what they need and support they need when we send them into harm's way.

As a nation—you've heard me say it, but I heard him say it in a similar way—we have many obligations, but only one truly sacred obligation: to properly prepare and equip those we send into harm's way and care for them and their families when they return home.

And there is no greater example of this than Ash's tendencies when it came to getting our troops serving in Iraq and Afghanistan mine-resistant, ambush-protected vehicles—MRAPs.

Tony and others remember. We were working together. I became the pain in the neck for everybody by pushing this so hard, but I had a little guy with a—a guy whispering in my ear. There were—some thought there were other priorities first, but not Ash.

In the early 2000s, 60 or 70—60 to 70 percent of our troop casualties were from road IEDs—improvised explosive devices—that would rip through the—our Humvees, as well as our troops who were riding in them.

I led the fight on the Senate floor in 2007 to make sure we were forward-funding the production of these MRAPs. I believed, along with the Commandant of the Marine Corps at the time, that we had, and I quote, a "moral imperative" to speed up their delivery to get our troops this critical equipment that would literally save—and literally did save—countless American lives and limbs.

But by the time the O-Biden—the Obama-Biden administration took office in 2009, the production and delivery of MRAPs to the field was still going too slowly. All that changed when Ash became the "acquisitions czar." It all changed. He made his mission to "work at war speed" to get our warfighters the best possible protection we could give them as fast as possible.

And he was personally engaged, refining and improving the design of the to make them safer and easier to maneuver—when—maneuver. When Ash learned that the troops in the field were having an issue with visibility, he was at the R&D facility the very next day. He was there to see the problem for himself, ride the vehicle—in the vehicle, and get it done.

In 2012, Ash had been promoted to Deputy Secretary. By that time, we had deployed more than 24,000 MRAPs. Casualty rates among troops transported by MRAPs came down by as much as 75 percent compared to those riding in Humvees. Ash got it done.

And as I told the family when I met them beforehand, I have a—probably, I don't know, 3½, 4-foot-long by 10 inches high, maybe a foot high, photograph of MRAPs lined up side by side with a note from Ash saying: "Thanks. Ash Carter." I have it hanging in my office at home—in my home.

You know, it's amazing what he did with his background as a scientist. I just—he got it done. And he literally saved, I think, in consequence of it, hundreds and hundreds, thousands of lives and limbs. He protected our servicemembers' futures because they were out defending ours.

How many Americans are alive today welcoming children of their own because of Ash Carter. How many of them who came home bearing the scars of war have memories of Ash at their bedside—Stephanie right there with him—as they recovered at Walter Reed and other places around the world?

All those quiet visits to Walter Reed—without the press, without any fanfare, standing long before he became Secretary. Holding the hands of wounded warriors. Hugging the family members and keeping them close. Listening to their stories, which they want to tell and we should listen to. And finding something to smile about together, despite their pain.

Ash's connection to our troops and their families was more than a professional duty. To him, it was personal.

And to Stephanie: You were fundamental to that. You helped Ash to bring his fullest self to his service. He could not have been the Secretary of Defense that he was, the mentor he was, the man he was, without your love and support. It meant so much to so many.

Remember Emerson: "An institution is the lengthened shadow of one man." And it was a long shadow.

Or as Ash sometimes told his students, "You are my legacy now." You are my legacy now. And how many of them are.

Each of us here today—generations of national security leaders, decades of eager and brilliant students, the entire Armed Forces of the United States of America—we all will forever bear the imprint of Ash Carter, thank God.

May we continue to carry the legacy of Ash with us in our hearts. May we be guided by his foresight, his ferocious mind, fortified by his integrity. And may we always seek the truth. May we always strive to be of service.

May God bless Ash Carter, a dear friend, a great American. And may God continue to protect our troops, who Ash so loved and loved him back.

NOTE: The President spoke at 11:41 a.m. at the Washington National Cathedral. In his remarks, he referred to Surya Nagaraja, son-in-law, Clayton Spencer, former wife, Corinne Greene and Cynthia DeFelice, sisters, and Stephanie Carter, wife, of former Secretary Carter; Gen. Mark A. Milley, USA, Chairman, and Gen. Joseph F. Dunford, Jr., USMC (Ret.) former Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff; Randolph M. Hollerith, dean, Washington National Cathedral; and Gen. James T. Conway, USMC (Ret.), former Commandant, U.S. Marine Corps. He also referred to his sister Valerie Biden Owens; and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) terrorist organization.

Categories: Addresses and Remarks : Former Secretary of Defense Ashton B. Carter, memorial service.

Locations: Washington, DC.

Names: Austin, Lloyd J., III; Blinken, Antony J.; Carter, Ashton B.; Carter, Ava; Carter, Mariah; Carter, Stephanie; Carter, Will; Conway, James T.; DeFelice, Cynthia; Dunford, Joseph F., Jr.; Greene, Corinne; Haines, Avril D.; Hollerith, Randolph M.; Mayorkas, Alejandro N.; McDonough, Denis R.; Milley, Mark A.; Nagaraja, Surya; Obama, Barack; Owens, Valerie Biden; Perry, William J.; Spencer, Clayton.

Subjects: Deaths, former Secretary of Defense Ashton B. Carter; Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) terrorist organization; Joint Chiefs of Staff; Maryland, Walter Reed National Military Medical Center in Bethesda; Nuclear weapons, nonproliferation efforts; Office of the Director of National Intelligence; Research and development; Secretary of Defense; Secretary of Homeland Security; Secretary of State; Secretary of Veterans Affairs; U.S. Armed Forces, funding and equipment, improvement efforts; U.S. servicemembers, service and dedication; Veterans, health and medical care; Walter Reed National Military Medical Center in Bethesda, MD.

DCPD Number: DCPD202300023.